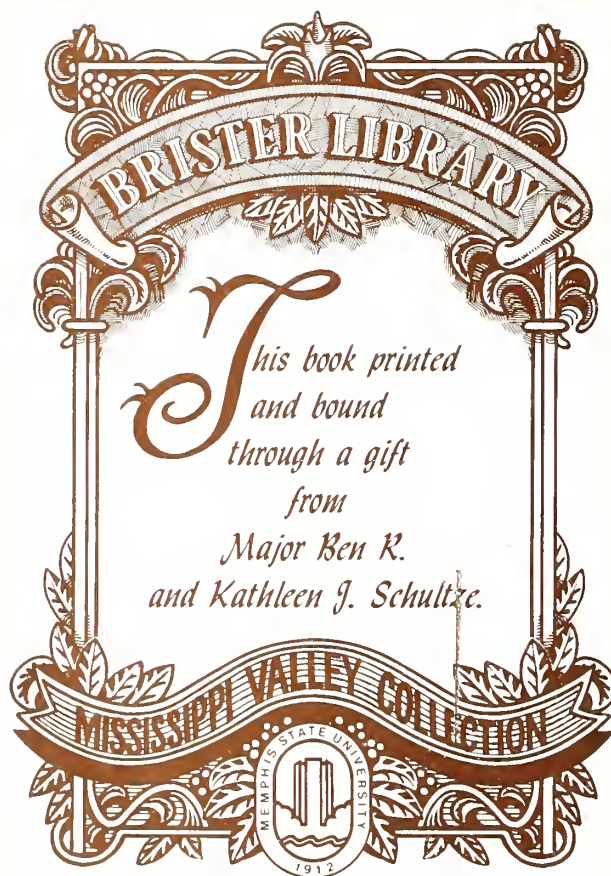


RECENT TENNESSEE POLITICAL HISTORY
INTERVIEWS WITH
FRANK AHLGREN

BY - CHARLES W. CRAWFORD
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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RECENT TENNESSEE POLITICAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWS WITH FRANK AHLGREN

MARCH 31, 1969

BY CHARLES W. CRAWFORD

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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PLACE 100 N Main St Memphis, Tenn

DATE April 3, 1969

Frank R. Ahlgren
(Interviewee)

Charles W. Crawford
(For the Mississippi Valley Archives
of the John Willard Brister Library
of Memphis State University)

THIS IS MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEWING
MR. FRANK AHLGREN, FORMER EDITOR OF THE MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL.
THE DATE IS MARCH 31, 1969. THIS IS TAPE NUMBER ONE (1).

DR. CRAWFORD: To begin with, let's get a little biographical information about you. It is very well-known to me, and it's a matter of record, now, but we anticipate that this will be used by people far in the future and we would like to have it all together. Can you begin by telling maybe something of your family--where you were born? And maybe something about your early education.

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, I was born in Superior, Wisconsin on June 25, 1903. My father was Swedish, as the name indicates, and my mother was British. I attended what they call on the campus here the Training School. I don't know what the name of it is now. They call it the University?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, they still call it the Training School.

MR. AHLGREN: It is? Well, we had a Normal School--Superior--just as West Tennessee Normal. This was Superior Normal. We had a training school, and I attended that up through the eighth grade, and then I went to Central High and then to Lane Tech, in Chicago, and then back to Superior and graduated from Central High School there. I went to the University of Wisconsin for a brief time. My father was in politics, and fell out with the La Follette crowd. I went back to Superior and went to. . . I think it was then the State College. It, of course, now is a university, just as Memphis State is a university. It is interesting how these things have paralleled. I also studied law here at the Memphis University Law School--that was the night Law School. I was the last chairman of the board. In fact, that desk that

MR. AHLGREN: you have out there at the law school was our Moot Court desk in (con'td.) the old Memphis University Law School. I also studied a little law in Houston. We had the Napoleonic Code there--a hangover from the old French-Spanish days. I have been interested in journalism education. I am at present President of the American Consul on Education for Journalism. This is my sixth term, and I am very proud. It's the longest tenure that they have had, and they are probably going to get rid of me this time. I don't know. Is there anything else?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, sir. Can you tell me something about what you studied at different places and how you happened to be there. Was this full-time? Did it fit in with your work? When did you get interested in journalism?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, I went to Lane Tech in Chicago to study electrical engineering. In mathematics, newspaper men are historically poor. Of course, I didn't know that I was going to get interested in newspaper work. An English teacher suggested that I wrote better than I multiplied and subtracted. That interested me in journalism, and, of course, I became the high school correspondent to the local paper, and there it went. I also fired a switch engine on the railroad while I went to school for a while.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was that while you were at Lane Tech, sir?

MR. AHLGREN: No, this was when I came back. It was kind of a demanding schedule I had. I went to school from eight until two, and then worked on the railroad from three until twelve. But I managed all right.

DR. CRAWFORD: Sleep was no problem to you?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, you could sleep in class, just as they do now. I became interested in the newspaper. I was going to Superior State. I worked first for the Evening Telegram, and then for the Duluth Herald. I was

MR. AHLGREN: fortunate enough to write a few stories for the Milwaukee Journal (con'td.)

as their correspondent. They offered me a full-time job, so I went from Superior to Milwaukee.

DR. CRAWFORD: How old were you then, sir?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, I was going on 23.

DR. CRAWFORD: Had you considered journalism as a career before that time?

MR. AHLGREN:= Well, when I was in high school the bug bit me. I was the high-school correspondent, and then was offered a full-time job. I went for it.

DR. CRAWFORD: What part. . . .

MR. AHLGREN: At \$18 a week.

DR. CRAWFORD: What parts of your education, or what courses, were most useful?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, obviously, English and creative writing, and economics, sociology, and what knowledge I could get from law. That's why I went to night law school, primarily, to get business law, and the laws of publication, and the history of journalism law and that sort of thing.

DR. CRAWFORD: Have you felt that there were any other areas that you wished you had studied, such as you did law, later?

MR. AHLGREN: No, especially. I wish I had more time to put in on creative writing. I wish that I had gone to journalism school. At no time did I go to journalism school.

DR. CRAWFORD: Would you recommend that for beginners in journalism today?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, I would indeed, just as I would for anyone who would want a law career to enter a law school, but an interesting thing is developing. Many law schools now are recommending that the prospective law students take journalism. At Michigan, for example, they depend on the journalism courses to supply their freshman English. As you know, of course, the education

MR. AHLGREN: in journalism is based on a 75% liberal arts, and 25% strictly (con'td.) journalism in studies. That is not generally understood. People think that they learn how to print and how to handle a newspaper, and that's not true. The accreditation of a college of journalism is dedicated on the basis of students taking at least 75% liberal arts, and only 25% journalism subjects-- subjects related to writing or publishing.

DR. CRAWFORD: You feel, then, that your creative writing helped you a good deal?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, yes, unquestionably. Perhaps the best thing that happened to me, though, was my own disciplines in economics. I used to try to read everything that I could on economics that was considered acceptable writing on economics and whatever journalism books that were published by authentic or reputable publishing houses.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was this some part of a program of your own, Mr. Ahlgren?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Or did you simply enjoy it?

MR. AHLGREN: No, it was a program of my own. I tried to read one book on economics a month. I tried to read any book that was written by someone who knew what he was writing about on journalism. Whenever I came across one in a publisher's catalogue or reading Editor and Publisher, or any other trade paper that indicated new journalism publications I tried to read it.

DR. CRAWFORD: You've kept up with your profession, then, in the publications in economics, journalism?

MR. AHLGREN: I am inclined to, yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you read in other fields? Did you read in literature, for example?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, and I am very much interested in history. One of the things

MR. AHLGREN: that bothers me about my three sons is that none of them is (con'td.) interested in history. They regard it as a task, and I enjoyed it. Not exactly the dates, but the things that brought about history.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, if this encourages you any, I think that history is the sort of thing that one can pick up at any point in life and take a developing interest in it and start reading.

MR. AHLGREN: In fact, I am looking forward to in my retirement, picking up Gibbons again.

DR. CRAWFORD: What works influenced you most in your early years?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, I was an only child and alone quite a bit. Therefore I had a great need. I read everything. Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. . . My tastes are rather unorthodox and run from the Rover Boys to Dickens. I could even wade through some of Shakespeare. We had some of the original volumes. Now, when I say original, I mean in the old sets that they printed around 1910, I would say. Some of it was pretty gamey, too, I will admit. They are pretty laborious, but I read everything that I came across.

DR. CRAWFORD: You were fortunate to have those books at home. Or did you purchase your own? Did you have a library?

MR. AHLGREN: No, my folks had a library. It was not an extensive one, but just standard things like a set of Shakespeare and of Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, as I mentioned, Tales of the Sea. We did not have The Five-Foot Shelf until I was able to buy one myself.

DR. CRAWFORD: This is getting ahead of the course in which we are dealing with things now, but have you been able to find the time to continue that reading?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, I read. Occasionally I go over the best sellers in the New York Times and find out how many I have read. If I've only read a couple,

MR. AHLGREN: I send down to the book store and get two or three that are on
(con'td.)
that list.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think that. . .

MR. AHLGREN: I want to have read at least half of the books on the best-seller
list.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think that this is good for an editor to keep in contact
with what people are reading?

MR. AHLGREN: Indeed, indeed. I think that editors should keep in touch with
these so-called Art Films. I did not. I used to see the ads and throw
some of them out because of their lewdness, but I had never seen one of
those things until "Tom Jones", if you could consider that. I don't.
That's just a semi-nudie, as they call them. I saw one of them the other
day, and I was absolutely shocked to see that they would permit these things
to be displayed. I think that I would have been much more indignant had I
taken time to go and see one or two of them. Of course, there is always
the reluctance of having somebody say, "Well, I saw you at one of those lewd
pictures the other day." But I ought to have been seeing more of that and
writing editorials about it, because I regard them. . . . What I saw, (and
I have heard some others say this, too) that they work some subversive things
into them such as little sermons favoring communism or some ideology
attacking this country, or our way of thinking. It's that permissiveness
again.

DR. CRAWFORD: You feel, then, that a newspaperman should keep up with what
people are seeing, thinking, and reading?

MR. AHLGREN: I do, even if they accuse you of being a little too interested
in things that aren't quite moral. That's your job. You should.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, this program of reading and training yourself as you went along. . . Did you plan that from the beginning, or did you develop this idea?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, no. I developed it as I went along, of course. I have an article here in a journalism. . . I'll give you a copy if I have one. I just happen to have the five or six that Professor Jaffee sent me. "The Journal as an Educator", published by the American Society of Journalism School Administrators. Now, they're members of the A.S.J.S.A., and I guess that is why I was asked to write for it. But in my article there I tell how I became interested in newspaper work, and finally in journalism education. I'm not sure whether it started with reading Irvin S. Call's Stickfuls, which is a story about his career in journalism, which delighted me. I discovered that in our public library when I was fifteen. Or it might have been when I was a cub on the Milwaukee Journal when Grant Hyde, who was an instructor at the University of Wisconsin journalism school. He used to do a summer stint there, and I was very respectful and stood in some awe of him. That might have brought me into journalism, I don't know.

DR. CRAWFORD: Had you already decided to go into journalism when you met these people?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes, sure.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you have any people who were models in their journalism careers that you followed?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes. I must mention the first one, Irvin Cobb. He was a delightful person. He could do anything, and do it swiftly and well. Oh, Harry Grant, of the Milwaukee Journal, a publisher there, and, of course, the greatest influence was John Sorrells, who was the executive editor of Scripps-Howard and also President of the Commercial Appeal when I became editor. He had a

MR. AHLGREN: great influence on me. He was someone who had great executive (con'td.) talents, but also could write like an angel.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you have any idea that you would ever go as far, administratively, as you did, Mr. Ahlgren? Was your interest mainly in writing?

MR. AHLGREN: No, I think that the administrative appealed to me more after I got into it. I was on the copy desk, and I saw that that was where most of the executives. . . Well, they know how. . . They knew where the parts fit. They knew how to move things along, and they knew how to shape the writings of others when they were a little too accusive or, frankly, too long for the subject they are handling. The copy desk is the one that does this. It brings them down to size and sees that they get into form. That intrigued me. Once I was on the copy desk, that was what I wanted.

DR. CRAWFORD: How broad was your experience before getting to the copy desk? Did you cover, as a reporter, many different things?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, I was the Superior bureau man for the Duluth Herald, and I covered everything there from society to sports. The only chair I haven't sat in on a newspaper is markets. I never have been a markets editor, but I have been a sports editor, a city editor, a Sunday editor, a news editor, and a managing editor. You name it, and I've been it. Even I was in the society department for a while.

DR. CRAWFORD: When you arrived in Milwaukee, you were about 23 or so?

MR. AHLGREN: I was about $22\frac{1}{2}$, yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: How long were you there?

MR. AHLGREN: For a year. I came here when I was 23.

DR. CRAWFORD: What was your experience, now, in Milwaukee?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, there I worked on the copy desk. In those days we had a six-day week, and then you worked Saturday night, too. But one week I would be

MR. AHLGREN: on the desk, and then next I would be out on the field writing (con'td.)

feature stories. I was kind of a roving reporter then. The local correspondent would line up some tips for news stories and I would go in for interviews. At that time we had to hire a photographer to take pictures. That was before it was so mobile. Now everybody has a camera and machines that will transmit pictures over your telephone wires.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you develop any ideas or pictures of your own?

MR. AHLGREN: Why, sure. Just because the correspondent had something lined up didn't mean that we all weren't going to look for something unusual--talking to people in hotels, the public places, call on the mayor. You always met the mayor and the big dignitaries around there. The Milwaukee Journal, of course, is a big paper in Wisconsin, and a representative of the Journal got entre almost anywhere.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you judge what would make a good feature?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, the best test is, "Have you ever heard anything like this before?"

DR. CRAWFORD: In a general sort of way, sir, I was in college journalism, as a student. Since that time I have just been a reader, I think. Did you sort of have a feeling for what would interest people?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, you get on in the business, and you read what others have done. You read ole out-of-town newspapers. The New York World was a great source of inspiration for me. I began adapting their local situations to situations here in Memphis. I did that quite frequently when I was directing the city desk, or even when I was a reporter here briefly.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you believe that there was a decline of the feature story in the last few decades?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, no. I think that it has improved considerably, because it is better documented. The people handling them are much better qualified. They have the education, and they have indoctrination in writing that we didn't have. They also have an understanding of what shakes the world occasionally. That is the academic world and the political world. Consequently, when they go in to do a feature story, they can put it up against a number of standards, if you want to call them that. Maybe that isn't coherent, but I think you know what I mean. They can think the significant matters of those things, as long as bringing up the pointers to the situation. They can work it around.

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, and they certainly are better-trained now.

MR. AHLGREN: They think better than we did. I mean, not you, but me. You are a much younger man.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, I wondered, really, about that. I didn't know much about it, but it seemed to me that the great age of feature writing might have declined simply because we get so much well-documented news now.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, if you're talking about whimsey, you're right. There isn't enough room, and people don't have enough time to indulge in it. On the other hand, if you will notice our Sunday magazine is extremely popular. But there, again, it's not entirely feature stories. It's how to do things. Well, features, as such, are not just coincidental tales, lots of them.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you like the work in Milwaukee?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, I had stepped right from the sticks into the big league, and I was bewildered by it. I'm sure it didn't slow me down any, because one of my friends who had worked with me on the Duluth Herald became city editor here. He wrote and said, "Come to Memphis. I'm going to be managing editor, and if you show the enterprise that you did in Duluth, Minnesota, you

MR. AHLGREN: can be city editor." Well, here I was, 23 years old, and city (con'td.) editor sounded pretty good. It didn't quite work out that way, but at 25 I was evening manager editor of the Evening Appeal.

DR. CRAWFORD: What else did you have time to do in Milwaukee? You must have been quite busy in the league there.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, yes, because I was working six days a week, and then Saturday night. Well, it was a shorter work day on Saturday, and we put out the Sunday paper on Saturday night. I was pretty busy every day except Sunday.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did the hard work and the long hours not discourage you?

MR. AHLGREN: No. I had a young lady going to school in Chicago, north of Milwaukee. She would meet me in Racine. She would get a transit from Chicago, and I would get it from Milwaukee. After I had done my stint at the Saturday night paper, I would catch an 11 o'clock transit and meet her in Racine. She stayed with some friends there. I would think nothing of racing down to that depot, as we called it in those days, and riding to Racine. Then we would probably stay up all night, laughing and talking, and even going to church on Sunday.

DR. CRAWFORD: You did have time to live, then, the sort of life that you wanted?

MR. AHLGREN: Sure.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were you sorry to leave Milwaukee? Did you regret leaving that part of the country?

MR. AHLGREN: No, not when I left. I left at a very bad time to arrive here. I got here in late August in a light wool suit, which is perfectly satisfactory for Milwaukee's cool breezes in late August, but it was murder here. I stepped off the Illinois Central train right into an oven on a hot, August day. I really suffered. It took me a while to adjust to the heat here, as

MR. AHLGREN: compared to Milwaukee.
(con'td.)

DR. CRAWFORD: What were your first impressions of Memphis?

MR. AHLGREN:= They were pretty bad, because. . .

DR. CRAWFORD: Was that compared with Milwaukee?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes. Aside from the Courthouse here, and the Peabody Hotel, and maybe the Claridge, downtown Memphis didn't look too good in those days. This was in 1926, but it certainly has changed now.

DR. CRAWFORD: Things were comparatively prosperous then, weren't they?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, cotton and lumber were both doing very well.

DR. CRAWFORD: What was the greatest change that you noticed from Milwaukee in Memphis?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, obviously, the heat, and then. . .On the positive side here, though, the people are much more friendly. The first week I was here they assigned me to. . .At any rate, I was over in the courthouse, and somebody introduced me to. . . Oh, for heaven sakes, I wish I had known you were going to ask me this. But at any rate, he was an assistant county court clerk, and he was a vestryman at Grace Church. Joy, Mel Joy. He was a vestryman at Grace Episcopal Church, and he found out that I was an Episcopalian and invited me to go to church with him. Then he found out that I sang in the choir at the cathedral in Milwaukee. I was just one of them, not a soloist or anything, but I was in the choir.

P A U S E I N T H E T A P E

MR. AHLGREN: . . .too long, because about a month after I got here they sold the newspaper that I had joined. I was told that they were going to start a new one, the Evening Appeal. I tried to get a job back in Milwaukee.

MR. AHLGREN: I was very down-hearted. They were all loaded up.
(con'td.)

DR. CRAWFORD: What was the change? Was the Commercial Appeal owned from Nashville at that time?

MR. AHLGREN: No, the line-up was this. Paul Block and M. F. Hanson, (not the Hansons from Birmingham, this is the Hanson from Philadelphia) owned the Duluth Herald, for which I worked. I went to the Milwaukee Journal, and the courts reporter for the Herald came here, because Paul Block owned the old News Scimitar. Then Scripps-Howard owned the Press. The Scripps-Howard Press bought the News Scimitar from Paul Block.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were both operating the same building at that time?

MR. AHLGREN: No, the Press was over here on Jefferson, and the News Scimitar was where the Greyhound Bus Depot is now. That was torn down when the Press-Scimitar came out to the Commercial Appeal building. So, I had worked against Hearst in Milwaukee. I was afraid of the Scripps-Howard chain. There were some overtures made, and I said, "No, I'm going to go back to Milwaukee." But I found to my dismay that they had some trouble. The Sentinel there was killing its afternoon paper, and there was some uncertainty. So I did not get a job there, and then I heard that there was to be a new paper started and I got lined up with the Evening Appeal here.

DR. CRAWFORD: How long did you wait between the two?

MR. AHLGREN: A month.

DR. CRAWFORD: What did you do in that time?

MR. AHLGREN: I worked for Tom Briggs. His successors still put out special editions. They are putting out a special section for the Commercial Appeal. I wrote feature stories about Overton Park, which I knew. (laughter) Oh, I would interview people in some of those sections where they. . .

MR. AHLGREN: The Briggs people would work up the advertising, and then they (con'td.) would send somebody along to interview the people and give them sort of a talk. When you asked what the motivating forces were. . . When I joined the Evening Appeal, after the News Scimitar had sold to the Press and became the Press-Scimitar, they put me on the Tri-State desk. I had been on the State desk on the Milwaukee Journal, so I could apply a lot of the techniques that I had learned in Milwaukee. That attracted the attention of George Morris, who was then the Managing Editor of the Evening Appeal. He had started me. He was the one who had hired me. He was one of the people who had considerable influence on my career. George certainly did. He had an understanding that very few men had, especially for a youngster like this young yankee, full of brass.

DR. CRAWFORD: How long were you associated with him, Mr. Ahlgren, and how long had he been here?

MR. AHLGREN: He'd been here. . . he'd been the editor of the old News Scimitar. I was associated with him from 1926. He left in '30, I believe. Yes, about '29 or '30. He left about '30, and then he came back in '32. Then, when I came back in '36, he went to Washington as our bureau man. So, from '26, until he died in about '56. . . No, he died about '44. Yes, we were close friends. At any rate, he gave me the opportunity as Tri-States editor, and I showed enthusiasm for the handling of things. Then he made me News editor, and then when the managing editor quit he put me in as temporary managing editor and then as managing editor.

DR. CRAWFORD: When did you become temporary managing editor?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, in about July of 1928, and then he put it on the bulletin board that I was the managing editor. You see, the managing editor walked

MR. AHLGREN: out. He had a dispute with Mr. Morris. Someone had to run the (con'td.) show, so we had a meeting in there, and he had me made managing editor. I served until about the first of the year. That's when Luke Lee took over the newspapers. He took over in about '27. That's right. But Luke Lee was then the owner.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was his home in Nashville?

MR. AHLGREN: Nashville, that's right.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did he ever spend time in Memphis?

MR. AHLGREN: Not ever more than a week at a time. No, he would come in for a couple of days, maybe, but he had a direct line to Nashville and he would dictate pretty well what the policy should be in the manner of Hearst. It was quite in contrast to the way Scripps-Howard operates. Scripps-Howard just puts you in there and lets you run the show. If you didn't run it successfully, then they got a new boy. But they would never try to tell you what to do.

DR. CRAWFORD: I have noticed the different acceptable patterns in Scripps-Howard papers in different cities.

MR. AHLGREN: They kind of cut the cloth to fit the community. I don't mean by that that they compromise the truth or any of these things. But there are some communities like the South that does things a certain way. Well, as an example, the only thing that they ever told me to do was to run it in the example of the Commercial Appeal, and the Commercial Appeal was an institution, not just a newspaper, and dated back to 1840. It has a lot of peculiarities that the people like, so we tried to do nothing to destroy that flavor.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was there any particular change under Luke Lee's ownership?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes. Things were politically oriented. He was a politician.

MR. AHLGREN: He was not a newspaperman. Finally, when we ran into receiverships, (con'td.)

th then Jim Hammond, who also was not a newspaperman, but had gotten into it through the back door of radio and worked for Hearst and was publisher of the Detroit Times and had come from Luke Village, Arkansas, knew the Commercial Appeal. So when it was up on the block for its debts (it owed about two million in bonds and paper bills), he went to the Roy Howard Foundation. In those days wealthy men had their own foundations in their business, incorporated, so they limited their liabilities. The Roy Howard Trust, rather, backed Jim Hammond. \$32,000 in cash was all he put up. But he assumed the \$2,400,000 obligation.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was in the early 1930's, wasn't it?

MR. AHLGREN: That was in 1933. I remember it very well.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did the operation of the paper continue steadily through that time?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes. Jim in the summer of '33, made a deal that he would discontinue the Evening Appeal, of which I was the managing editor. He would discontinue that, and the Press-Scimitar, which had decided to put out a Sunday paper, decided not to. They both raised their prices. They had to. It had been economic suicide. You were getting 13 editions for fifteen cents. You were getting the six-day Commercial and the Sunday, and the six-day Evening Appeal for fifteen cents. The Press-Scimitar was selling for ten cents a week. You couldn't even recover the price of the paper for that.

DR. CRAWFORD: I believe that I remember from reading your paper in the early '30's, that advertising revenues were considerably down then.

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, sure. Everything was down. We had the stock market crash in '29. By 1930 people were pulling out their ads, and we didn't have anybody to sell them to. Nobody had any money.

DR. CRAWFORD: There are more questions that I would like to ask, Mr. Ahlgren,
but I believe that the time you set is up now.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, when do you want to come back?



THIS IS MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
PROJECT INTERVIEWING MR. FRANK AHLGREN, RETIRED EDITOR OF THE
MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL. THE INTERVIEWER IS DR. CHARLES CRAWFORD.
THE DATE IS APRIL 8, 1969. THE PLACE IS MR. AHLGREN'S OFFICE IN
THE 100 NORTH MAIN BUILDING, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Ahlgren, last time we discussed developments in Memphis
in your career, we discussed developments mainly through the 1930's.
We are reaching approximately the point at which Chief Joe Boyle
cleaned up Memphis. Could we begin there this time?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, I think that perhaps the on-coming war was changing
Memphis. It was changing the economy considerably. We had a big
shell-loading plant out at Woodstock, near Millington, Tennessee.
Then, of course, the Navy started building an installation there for
the expanding Navy forces. Firestone had established a plant here about
1935, I believe. There were a series of difficulties when C. I. O. tried
to organize the plant. Mr. Crump vigorously opposed the organization.
Some of his people (the police) tried to escort some of the organizers
out of town. These tactics proved fruitless, however, as we all know.
In due time we had organized labor on two fronts. Now, this doesn't
necessarily mean that Mr. Crump was against organized labor. He was
an A. F. L. (American Federation of Labor) supporter, and, of course,
these people trying to organize Firestone were C. I. O.

DR. CRAWFORD: He had A. F. of L. support in his organization, did he not?



MR. AHLGREN: Yes. He always managed to have a labor man in his city commission or in the various quasi-public commissions.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did Memphis seem to be a favorable place for organized labor in the 1930's?

MR. AHLGREN: Not in the sense of un-skilled labor. The crafts enjoyed (well, not exactly the sponsorship), but they at least found cooperation in the Crump organization. Many of its leaders became Crump's men. For instance, Judge Sam Campbell was the executive business agent for the Motion Picture Projectors Union. He studied law nights, and became a criminal courts judge. Robert Tillman was a printer out of our place. He studied law, and they later made him a general sessions judge. With that kind of fraternal interest in the union they scratched each others' backs. The C. I. O. was a different bag from Crump's point. He didn't like John L. Lewis's tactics, and they were so much like his own. (laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: Did he actually fear communist influence in the C. I. O. ?

MR. AHLGREN: Why, yes, and with good reason. So did we. We were probably instrumental in alarming him about it. We found it in the newspaper guild. There was a Memphis newspaperman, Harry Martin, who was in the thick of the fight against communism, finally had the communist officers thrown out, including a self-confessed, card-carrying communist, out of the old heirarchy.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was considerably later that the communists were forced out, wasn't it, Mr. Ahlgren?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, it was around 1940 or '41. Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was there a case of a C. I. O. convention which was held, or nearly held in Memphis, that Mr. Crump opposed? Some sort of planned meeting?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, the guilds, the national guilds. Mr. Crump, in his inaugural speech as mayor, from the back of an Illinois Central train, thanked his supporters. He saw some of the newsmen in the crowd, and he said, "You can tell your C.I.O. people that they aren't invited to Memphis, even if they are going to have their convention here. They're not wanted." Words to that affect.

DR. CRAWFORD: At what point did he change his view towards the C.I.O.?

MR. AHLGREN: I'm not sure he ever changed it.

DR. CRAWFORD: After they were established in Memphis, did he work with them?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, yes. Of course, they were in the A.F.L., too. He didn't vigorously oppose them, no. I don't know that he ever really accepted them.

DR. CRAWFORD: What sort of change did World War II bring to the labor situation in Memphis?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, we were fresh out of folks. Everybody that was able-bodied, was, of course, working.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were the Unions able to control this new group of workers?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes. They were issuing work permits, and it was a scandal. Well, they were building arsenals up here in West Tennessee, and this union and that union would sell work permits to unskilled people. I don't know how they muddled through, but it was a scandalous thing. Harry Truman made his reputation by heading the Senate war investigating committee. He came here and wrote a report on the bungling that was going on and how the contractors were on a cost-plus basis. They didn't care what the union should be doing as long as the bodies were showing up and the payrolls were moving. So, Truman made his first impression

MR. AHLGREN: on the country with the way he. . .with the forthright manner in (con'td.)
which he went after these war contractors. Memphis was the scene of several inquiries. We had developments all around us that were adding to the economy. It was diversified. I'll say this for Mr. Crump and Mr. Hale. They were very careful to try to get a varied industrial complex. They weren't dependant on any one thing, which easily could have been if we had concentrated on just Firestone. Of course, DuPont later took over the shell-loading plant near Millington. They were really the agents for the British government and the establishment. But DuPont put in a chemical factory and chemical laboratories. Then we got W. R. Grace in. Of course, that's chemical. Then Kimberly Clark came in with wood pulp processing. It was so that if any one factory got shut down for economic or labor reasons, we wouldn't have too big of an impact on the community.

DR. CRAWFORD: What did Mr. Crump and Hale do to encourage this boom of industry?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, they would cut out little pockets on the outskirts of the city and make them tax-free and that sort of thing. City taxes, at least, or county taxes, as the case may be. The assurance of quiet and tranquility was quite an item in those days. They weren't always able to deliver that, because we had some long Firestone strikes, for instance. Then International Harvester came in here, and we had some long International Harvester strikes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Labor relations were comparatively calm in Memphis, though, weren't they?

MR. AHLGREN: Better than most communities. He (Mr. Crump) wouldn't let the agitators who were in just for the ride and for what harm they could

MR. AHLGREN: do get in. He got pretty close to them and made life miserable (con'td.)
for them.

DR. CRAWFORD: Then he considered the C.I.O. more dangerous than the A. F. of L.?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you feel that this was the period of Memphis' greatest economic growth? Did it slow down in the 50's, then, and the 60's?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, of course, it was a growth predicated on the war effort. It mushroomed to the point where there were prices like any other community. The prices were out of control and they had to slap on National Price Control and rationing and that sort of thing. There is another side to it. Mr. Crump and Mr. Hale wanted to be on the pay-as-you-go basis. During the war they couldn't do much about it. But after the war, instead of catching up on our streets that needed repair, inadequate sewage facilities, Mr. Crump, I think, rightfully, kept the state's feet to the fire, because Memphis was paying more than a fifth, and closer to a fourth, of the state's taxes and we were not getting money back. He would delay building streets or repairing streets until he could get the state committed and in on it, and the Federal Government. As a consequence, we lagged behind the other communities on freeways and that sort of thing.

DR. CRAWFORD: Now, this was in the post-war period?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes. When Chandler finally took over as Mayor, the economy of patch and mend prevailed whereas it should have been bringing bigger and better things, and getting the tax rate up. Mr. Crump was holding the tax line. Why, sure, you can go out to eat, too, and hold down expenses, but the body isn't going to remain very healthy. I think

MR. AHLGREN: it's commendable that he wanted to keep the tax rate down.
(con'td.)

As a tax payer, I couldn't help but feel that we were getting our money's worth, but also, as an editor I watched Atlanta and Dallas and some of these other places outstrip us.

DR. CRAWFORD: When did you first become aware of the differential, Mr. Ahlgren?

When did you notice that such places as Dallas and Atlanta were pulling ahead of Memphis?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, about 1949. About '48, '49, or '50.

DR. CRAWFORD: Not throughout the war then? Not throughout the war period?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, it would be unfair to make comparisons then, because we were all under federal control. But afterwards Dallas and Atlanta went ahead and invested in the future, and Memphis was trying to stay on a pay-as-you-go basis. We have found, to our dismay, that a community, especially one that is dependant on the territory, has to spend money to get money. Now, the bonded debt today is \$.65 out of every \$2.25. For a bond service that's quite a bit, but it is because during those years when we didn't have to we could have borrowed and then retired. We had to borrow all of a sudden, and at a terrific rate. Now we're right up to our necks in bonded debt.

DR. CRAWFORD: About what time did all of this borrowing become necessary?

MR. AHLGREN: After Mr. Crump died. The city was falling apart.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think this was the weakness in his whole economic policy, or was it something more apparant as he grew older?

MR. AHLGREN: I think that he did not move with the times. He should have known. He had one of the biggest, best mortgage businesses in the South. He knew what was happening to the demands for homes, streets, sewers, and

MR. AHLGREN: lights and everything. But he wanted to do this on a pay-as-
(con'td.)

you-go basis. The economy was exploding, and he didn't want to raise the tax rate. It caused me a lot of embarrassment to be a newspaper editor advocating increased taxes. The people didn't understand that. Of course, with the affection they had for Mr. Crump, I was in the doghouse. But still, I would have my say. It turned out in later years we had to borrow and we had to go to a higher rate than we had. We had to rebuild things that if we had gone along with the program of building and quit this foolishness of holding to the \$1.10 tax rate or whatever it was, why, we would have been up with the other cities.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did he at any time consider employing consultants? Using professionals to do long-range planning?

MR. AHLGREN: You see, during the Payne administration Crump was out. I hesitate to say out of power. He still was able to swing his own trustees election, and so on, but he was not running the city government. Payne hired the Harlon Bartholomew Associates about 1922 or '23, and they put out a master plan for Memphis, which was to be up-dated through the years. There was very little attention paid to it after Crump got into office.

DR. CRAWFORD: Why did he not take action? Was it the political sponsorship of it, or was it just contrary to his view?

MR. AHLGREN: I think it was contrary to his view. He thought that he was the master planner, and he would ride the city from one end to the other. Walter Chandler, who was mayor and retired, wanted to get back into private practice so that he could make some money. He did, but when Frank Tobey--Mayor Frank Tobey--died, the people prevailed on him to

MR. AHLGREN: come back into office. At that time he said, "Memphis has (con'td.) got to spend some money. All of these years we've been holding the line."

Of course, everything cost about three times as much. You can see that the tax rate is now more than twice as much as it was, and we have a sales tax. But we are still behind. You read in the paper this morning where they've got to find new sources of revenue, because we've got to have a sewage treatment plan. This isn't something that is a frill. It's a necessity, or you're going to have a serious epidemic on your hands. The police department is under-manned.

DR. CRAWFORD: It seems that all public services are now short. Did this start becoming apparent in the late forties or the fifties?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, I think in the late forties.

DR. CRAWFORD: Does it seem that Mr. Crump, in his economic views, looked more backward to tradition rather than forward to the future?

MR. AHLGREN: As I said, there is no question about it. He didn't adjust with the times.

DR. CRAWFORD: How do you explain, then, his support of industry? Especially in World War II? I believe that's in contrast with some of the older Southern economic ideas.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, these industries were looking for sites, and he wanted to get his share of them. He did. That meant more voters, more payroll, more houses to mortgage. There was no mystery about that.

DR. CRAWFORD: He was interested in the growth of Memphis, but he wanted it to be growth of the type of Memphis that he was accustomed to?

MR. AHLGREN: Exactly. Don't misunderstand me. There is much to be said for tradition. I am a great admirer of it. I think that it's the glue that holds things together. I also believe that you can sit still or you can move so slowly that you don't get the benefits of a progressive community that wants to gamble a little bit on its tax situation.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think that the more serious problem was the lack of tax revenues, or the failure to issue bonds?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, they didn't issue bonds, because they would have to pay the interest debt. They didn't want to increase the tax rate. That would be an automatic tax rate. He was just hoping that there would be such an expansion, and of course, there was always the matter of tax assessments. They could always up those. You see, Memphis has had a 50 percent tax assessment for many years, whereas the rest of the state is coming in, some of them, at almost zero in some of those backward counties.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did the tax burden seem high to citizens of the city, say in the forties and the fifties?

MR. AHLGREN: No, I don't think it did, but when they jumped them in the late and mid-fifties and had to do something, then the people started hollering. Since then, of course, they have gone up.

DR. CRAWFORD: How widely was this realization that taxes would have to up felt? Did the people, in general, seem to understand?

MR. AHLGREN: The people in general seemed to want to leave it to Mr. Crump. This is the tragedy of it. Mr. Crump could say, "Well, we've got to crank up and raise taxes." If he had said this he could have gotten away

MR. AHLGREN: with it. But he was always afraid of it. I'll give you an (con'td.)

example. I don't think I've referred to this before. Governor Jim McCord saw the necessity of having a sales tax, and had exhausted all revenues from the liquor tax on up. They had run the liquor tax up as high as they could. They had run the licenses up as high as they could. They had run everything up that they could. The license was a real big source of revenue. We were way ahead on our gasoline tax and our cigarette tax, but they had reached the point of diminishing returns. We, at the Commercial Appeal, conducted a survey in Tennessee, and particularly West Tennessee, showing the deplorable conditions of Tennessee's public schools. Now, Memphis had taken pretty good care of its schools and still does. We've a fine educational system, but in the rest of Tennessee we had teachers without certificates running schools and this type of thing. We couldn't get enough teachers. We couldn't get enough money to repair the schools, and the Tennessee kids were in bad. . . Well, I sent Bob Talley out on the road for about five or six months, writing stories about it, taking pictures. The governor said, "Well, I guess I'll have to have a sales tax. I've exhausted every other way." I said, "Governor, the Commercial Appeal has historically been against the sales tax, as we don't have a compensating income tax that is far-reaching enough to hit those that should be hit. People that have stocks and bonds are hit, but there is no real income tax." I said that I thought that the sales tax should have a compensating income tax, too. This is so that the burden doesn't fall on one class of society.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you feel that the sales tax alone was unfair?



MR. AHLGREN: Yes, but out of desperation we finally advocated it.

Governor McCord came to town. He called me and said, "Frank, I'm going to talk with Mr. Crump. He is the most powerful political force in the state. I'm going to talk to him about the sales tax. You have made quite a study of it. I wish you could come down with me." I said, "Well, Governor, I don't think that I want to be in on a political conference. We handle our own political observations. We want to be in a position where we can applaud or complain. I don't want to be in on any political conference. I could see the afternoon paper saying that the morning paper editor is in the political huddle." He says, "Well, we won't have it in Mr. Crump's office. We'll have it at the Claridge Hotel. Will you come then? I really need your help, and the children of Tennessee need your help." I said, "All right, all right, I'll be there." I think I have told you this, haven't I?

DR. CRAWFORD: No, sir, I don't believe so.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, Mr. Crump and Jim Pleasant, who, at that time had been a judge and had gone to war in the Navy and had come back was there. They put him in the City Attorney's office because they didn't want to remove the judge and replace him with Pleasant. Jim wanted to be mayor. Willie Gerber was there, and Joe Boyle. Crump had his henchmen. Will Fowler, the engineer, was there. They sat around while Crump asked the group to think on this, but he didn't want to back a sales tax. Of course, I had thought on it, and I had come to the conclusion that there was no other way to go. McCord said, "If you can think of any other source of revenue that we haven't touched upon, you let me know. Unless you do come up with one, we are going to have to go for it." Well, Mr. Crump got Jim Pleasant to go and get a World Almanac. He read out of it where this

MR. AHLGREN: governor and that governor had advocated a sales tax and was (con'td.)

defeated. It was really for McCord's benefit. McCord said, "I understand the risk I am taking, but the school children of Tennessee come first. Unless you can come up with something. . ." Mr. Crump couldn't, and McCord said, "I'm going to go for it." He then turned to me and he said, "Frank you heard that committment. Have you any comment?"

I said, "No, I agree with you, and you agree with me, and we have historically opposed sales tax unless accompanied by an income tax, and under the state constitution you can't have an income tax in Tennessee." Then Willie Gerber spoke up, and he said, "Mr. Crump, don't forget that in this sales tax, Shelby County's got to have its share." They went into a huddle, and I said, "Now, you are getting into politics, gentlemen. I came down here at the invitation of Governor McCord." Mr. Crump said, "Oh, you've got to wait and have lunch with us." So I stayed and had lunch. I could hear snatches of conversation. Finally, they worked it out that the delegation from Shelby County would split down the middle. Some were for and some were against, so as not to endanger the take that Shelby County would get. As it was, we didn't get our portion of the share. But still, those country politicians would have had us if they had opposed it entirely. Frankly, it might have killed it.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, that followed the usual Tennessee tradition of Shelby County not getting its share of taxes in return, didn't it?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel that progress was made significantly over a period of time in equal treatment of Shelby County?

MR. AHLGREN: It has improved.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel that there was a resentment of the size of Shelby County in state politics, or in Boss Crump's control?

MR. AHLGREN: Both. It's always been "Big Shelby," which the rest of the state has resented. Then, of course, with the Crump delegation voting as a unit and throwing its weight around by delivering votes to a preposterous majority of 65,000 to 1,200 and things like that. This happened on election night. I was there and saw it. Frank Rice came up to our news room to find out how the vote was going on the liquor law repeal. He said, "What's the Shelby vote? and Rice would say, "Well, let's wait and see how many votes we need." They were just that brazen about it.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was generally known throughout the state, wasn't it?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did that have anything to do with the present difficulty, or the later difficulty of West Tennesseans getting elected to state office?

MR. AHLGREN: Sure. Of course, this is not just West Tennesseans, per se, as it is Shelby Countians. Although, it helped Edmund Orgill, I think, to run for governor. He had Kefauver's support.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did the first real challenge to Mr. Crump come in 1948?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, and that was the first organized one. Browning and Kefauver joined up and they used the Crump Machine as their whipping boy. Even so, Kefauver did not get his majority.

DR. CRAWFORD: What elements of support did they get in the city?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, very little. He had the Press-Scimitar, Edmund Orgill, Lucius Burch, and I want to say a few "outs". They were "outs". A few who just didn't believe in a machine like Crump's; the people who had had their toes stepped on and some for just reasons of independence.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were there many new voters? Had the city grown a great deal in that time?

MR. AHLGREN: It had grown considerably through the influence of the war-workers, but not to the extent. . . Crump's candidate carried Shelby County, and he had an unknown. He would have beaten Kefauver if Senator Stewart hadn't gotten into the race and defied Crump. "You're not going to cast me off." he said to Crump. So they had a three-man race, and Kefauver came through in the middle.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel that the economic or the political legacy that Mr. Crump left Memphis has been more influential in holding the city the way it has been in preventing, say, catching up with Dallas and Atlanta?

MR. AHLGREN: No, it fell apart when he died. Edmund Orgill was elected mayor. Henry Loeb. . . although Henry Loeb was a member of the park commission, and had to be appointed with Mr. Crump's approval, he was an independent. He was not much involved as a Crump man, because he and Bates used to feud, and Bert Bates was a real Crump follower. Well, Overton, who had been a Crump man, ran against Orgill with the support of what was left of the Crump organization, and Orgill beat him.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was the government as efficient with Mr. Crump gone?

MR. AHLGREN: No, it wasn't, because the commission form of government is a log-rolling, five-headed thing. One says, "I'll vote for your appropriation if you'll vote for mine." Well, the planning wasn't good. That is why the Commercial Appeal got on this council-manager form of government. Orgill and some of his cronies believed in the city-manager form. We took the attitude that the city-manager form was designed for a small community, but at its best would be just a slide-rule form of government, and you have to make some allowance for representation by the people, there, into the administration. This is the strong mayor form of government, where the mayor is elected by the people, not selected by some group. You have a better chance that way. We fought, bled, and died for it, and finally got it over. But the thing that we really failed on was to get a consolidated metro-government that would have incorporated the city and county.

DR. CRAWFORD: That's a bit ahead, I know, but what do you think the possibility is of Memphis' getting Metro?

MR. AHLGREN: I think that if they ever get this mayor-council thing straightened out, where the people realize that they can live with that sort of thing, well, I think that first they are going to abolish the county commission. I don't know where it will head, but it will be a combined cityOcounty council with a metro director elected. This is the course it should take.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you suppose that the Nashville example will influence Memphis?

MR. AHLGREN: Nashville? That's a good example, or Dade County in Florida. That's one you hear a lot about. They have had very poor success. They lack success in Dade County, and they still have hangups there that are unbelievable.

DR. CRAWFORD: Is that in the structure of the government?

MR. AHLGREN: It is in the people that manage to get into the structure of the government. But the logical thing is to have an over-all government in a community. With communications and the speed of travel, everybody is your next-door neighbor in a county, so why not have it all under one community government? There are a million inequities in the taxation still. I pay both city and county taxes. Outside the city, in the county, they pay one tax, and they get the benefits of the association of the city.

DR. CRAWFORD: It's very logical, but do you think that it conflicts too much with all the tradition of independent localities in the county, and with the feeling of being afraid to undertake something that expensive on the part of the Memphis people?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, that's what's holding up Whitehaven, or did hold it up, and may still, but they have an honest schedule now. I think that by the end of 1970, Whitehaven is going to be within the city limits.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, do you anticipate difficulty with other parts of the county?

MR. AHLGREN: Why, sure. They moved out to get away from the city, but they're benefitting from the government that the city affords them.

DR. CRAWFORD: Before we stop for today, Mr. Ahlgren, what do you think that the political inheritance of Mr. Crump has been? What effect do you

DR. CRAWFORD: think this machine had, after his death, on the people and on the (con'td.)

government? What happened to the pieces of it? How well did it hold together?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, it didn't hold together. Overton, who had been mayor under it, was defeated. Cliff Davis maintained his hold pretty well until the Negroes became organized. In the inner city here they beat Cliff. Nearly every district went republican. Oh, there were Crump supporters who were elected to office--Armour and Dwyer. On the other hand, Farris, Orgill, and Loeb were not Crump supporters. Particularly Farris and Orgill.

DR. CRAWFORD: Then it did not really survive his death, did it? He had made no provision for succession, I am sure.

MR. AHLGREN: No, none at all. His boys wanted none of it. He had not made any. Bobby wasn't equipped to. He was a playboy, and Ed just didn't want to. It wasn't his bag.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you know if Mr. Crump was disappointed personally with that? Did he hope to leave politics, as well as business, to the family?

MR. AHLGREN: I think he had hopes for Johnny.

DR. CRAWFORD: I know that he had a very strong sense of family.

MR. AHLGREN: John was a natural, and Bobby. . .in his younger days, you couldn't meet a more pleasant guy. He would have made a good campaigner, but he just kind of went astray, as we used to say.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, the city. . .

MR. AHLGREN: I think that Mr. Crump was motivated by the glamour of power.

In his younger days he was a reform candidate with some fight. He liked the idea of organization and keeping his fences mended and the science of politics. He emerged on the national stage as one of the bosses.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did he ever feel that he was out of date? That things were passing him by?

MR. AHLGREN: No, not Mr. Crump. He thought that some of these things were for the moment. I can remember when we were. . . Well, this was after Crump's death. We were raising hell to get some expressways for Memphis, and they kept stalling. They went and sent Will Fowler out to California when they were being built. There were some in Fort Worth and Dallas. Will wired, "Don't go overboard on these expressways." They were building them all over the country, and we were just sitting here on our hands.

DR. CRAWFORD: Why did they send Will Fowler?

MR. AHLGREN: He was the city engineer. I think that if the truth were known, Will Gerber was smart enough to realize that we needed them.

DR. CRAWFORD: The irony is now, I suppose, that Interstate 240 is the William Fowler Expressway.

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, and he was the guy that said, "Don't go overboard on them." Almost that they weren't here to stay, that they were an experiment. Of course, he had been out to Los Angeles and was bewildered by all of their interchanges.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, the economic legacy was anecessity to tax heavily to catch up after the end of the Crump era?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, and oneof his head men, Walter Chandler, was one of the administrators. Walter and I were on the Library Board. Walter was not a liberal, by any means. When things came up, like the problem of the city budget, well, he would just neglect the things and go on. They were trying to catch up over there.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Ahlgren, since you are still involved in the life of the city, may I ask you now what seems to you the best solution to deal with the public needs? That is the problem of financing police, education, streets, sanitation, and all of these other things.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, obviously, I am a tax payer, and I don't run down the street, waving my arms, saying, "Tax me some more." But if we are going to have the protection, if we are going to have the sanitation, we've got to tax the people to get it. I think that prperty tax should be increased. I don't mean just a few cents. I mean a real increase. In Atlanta they don't even know, some of them, what they are paying over there, but it's around four dollars and a half. One of the owners of one of the biggest stores over there was asked by the committee that went over from Memphis, "What is your tax rate?" He said, "Gentlemen, I don't know, but it isn't enough." That was said in the presence of about seventy= five top Memphis business leaders.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think that the Memphis business leaders are beginning to share that feeling?

MR. AHLGREN: I don't know. I would hesitate to say. When you start talking taxes, you get a lot of double talk. I think that the sewer

MR. AHLGREN: tax is necessary. After all, they are going to protect the
(con'td.)
people with this sewer treatment, and they ought to pay for it. Where
do they think it's going to come from? You can't keep adding to the
indebtedness. There is a ceiling, and we're already paying sixty-five
cents interest out of every two dollars and a quarter. Now, that just
doesn't make sense. That is of absolutely no worth to us at all. The
money is not reinvested here. It just goes to the maw of the banking
circles in Chicago, New York, and so on. And to some extent here, for
re-financing businesses.

DR. CRAWFORD: Why do you think there is such difficulty in increasing taxes
here, to say, the Atlanta level?

MR. AHLGREN: Because it is an ingrown fear of anybody belling the cat.
There is a limitation. The only way it can be raised is by referendum.
We've got to have enabling legislation first--a Shelby delegation--and
then put it through to the people. You don't want to go over. . . .
I think it's about forty-five cents that you don't want to go over. I
don't know. I haven't kept up with it that closely. But that has to be
done. Instead of doing that they are taxing garbage removal and the
sewer tax. They will have maybe a wheel tax. In fact, that fifteen
dollars we are paying now is a wheel tax.

DR. CRAWFORD: All piece-meal solutions?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, they are.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you suppose that Memphis, having been a cotton town, has
caused the economic outlook to be more backward?

MR. AHLGREN: More frugal. Not only that, but the cotton economy is fading.

MR. AHLGREN: I was reading the St. Louis Federal Reserve Board Review (con'td.)

yesterday. Cotton is going to have a carry-over. Well, half of the textile market is now taken by synthetics. So they will have a carry-over of ten million bales, or something like that. It all depresses the market so that they are really not support prices now. It's just that the cotton business is all folding up.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, it is a declining industry, and it has been the traditional Memphis industry, hasn't it?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, and now lumber is doing very well, They're in an upswing. But it isn't big enough. There are only about four really big lumber mills in Memphis. They don't employ enough.

DR. CRAWFORD: What tax reforms, then, do you think would be needed for the future growth, say to take a long-range guess?

MR. AHLGREN: A payroll tax, of course. We need a payroll tax. These bedroom communities are coming into Memphis, paying nothing for the streets, for safety, for anything, and they're going back to their own communities. We have to keep up everything. There should be a payroll tax. There should be an increase in property tax. There should be some increase in the ad valorem tax.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you consider the sales tax rate about high enough at present?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, of course, they always complain when we can't compete with Arkansas and Mississippi. Well, Arkansas and Mississippi have raised theirs. The thing is that it hits the people least able to pay. When you get it up around five cents, then think of those people who certainly have to exempt food items and everything else, then you are

MR. AHLGREN: going to get into it.
(con'td.)

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you see any other significant sources of revenue?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, that payroll tax would increase the revenue.

DR. CRAWFORD: Sales tax, property?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, property tax.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you suppose, Mr. Ahlgren, that it is really bad that Memphis has not grown as Atlanta and Dallas have in the minds of the people of Memphis? Do you suppose that there is a desire that it really be a large city, a progressive city?

MR. AHLGREN: It's hard to say. We have a great many new comers, and they are much less tradition-bound. There is a pride of community, and there is also the economics of being able to afford all of the things that a big city has. Look at Memphis State as an example. It's just bursting at the seams, and the Memphis people have to accommodate it some way or another. So, whether they like it or not, it's here, and we have to keep pace.

DR. CRAWFORD: Then it's a problem of keeping up with growth that is already here?

MR. AHLGREN: Indeed.

DR. CRAWFORD: Thank you very much, Mr. Ahlgren.

THIS IS MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
PROJECT INTERVIEWING MR. FRANK AHLGREN, FORMER EDITOR OF THE
MEMPHIS COMMERCIAL APPEAL. TODAY IS MAY 13, 1969, AND THE PLACE
IS MR. AHLGREN'S OFFICE IN THE 100 NORTH MAIN BUILDING. THIS IS
TAPE THREE WITH DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD INTERVIEWING.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Ahlgren, to this time we have gone over your early
life to some degree, your first impressions of Memphis, and some of
the political and economic changes you've seen in the city in which,
I noticed, you have seen a good deal of progress and growth. Could
you give me any idea of the reforms or changes that you have supported
over the years as editor of the Commercial Appeal, aimed toward
changing Memphis in certain directions?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, I think that we should say Memphis and the territory,
because the Commercial Appeal is an area newspaper. There are two
big things that stand out in my mind. One is that we, of course, were
the instigators of the Program of Progress, which resulted in the
present form of city government. I sometimes wonder after watching the
Councilmen perform whether we were right in doing so, but I think that
they've only been in office now for a year and almost six months.
They had their first full application of budgets and new systems of
finance and administration. For the first time they had a line-itemized
budget that had to be justified, and that did away with a lot of log-
rolling that prevailed under the commission form where one commissioner
would say, "I need this much money." The other commissioner would say,
"All right, I'll vote for you if you'll vote for mine." There is none

MR. AHLGREN: of that now, or I haven't been able to detect any. In fact, if (cont'd.)

anything, the pendulum has swung the other way pretty hard and some areas of city government are suffering. I'm a member of the Library Board, and we have had to cut off services. Not only have we had to stop expansion with a city that is rapidly growing, but we've had to cut off some services. I don't think that is good for the educational and spiritual growth of this community. Nevertheless, if the others are doing it, we are going to do it so that we can get the city back on a strong financial basis. Then, of course, the big area thing for us was the Plant to Prosper program, which, in short, applied business methods to farming. The Memphis area was largely a one-crop, cotton-producing area, and as the fortunes of cotton rose the incomes rose; when they fell the incomes went down the drain.

DR. CRAWFORD: Unfortunately, we've been in a falling period, haven't we?

This is since you've been editor, in general?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, we kind of stabilized it by putting in well-rounded farming practices. In short, each farm was a participant, and we had a hundred thousand farm families at one time.

I N T E R R U P T I O N

DR. CRAWFORD: Now that the interruption is over and we are recording again,

Mr. Ahlgren, would you go ahead with the Plant to Prosper Program, and then we'll be back to the P. O. P. program later?

MR. AHLGREN: For better farming we overcame the reluctance of many areas in. . .

MR. AHLGREN: Maybe you're too young to remember, but they had an attitude (cont'd.)

"Oh, those book farmers. They can't tell me anything." They were talking about the F. H. A. and the county agricultural agent and the home demonstration agents. You know, the family housing situation. But anyway, we overcame that distrust, or maybe even lethargy. Those people used to say, "Well, I haven't been farming as well as I know how, so why do I want this?" Nevertheless, the awards, the limelight, the banquets and so on gave a glamour that induced a lot of them to participate and it gave a great many more of them a hope that somebody was thinking about them and was trying to help them. The farmer was almost, you might say, mined out because of the constant growing of cotton without nitrogen to restore the soil. The agricultural agents and the home demonstration agents would go in there and tell them what various crops they needed to restore the nitrogen, or if it was just a sub-marginal operation, to tell them frankly that there ought to be some other kind of farm activity. We gave great emphasis to the stock farming and the cattle growing. And soybeans, of course, came along. We encouraged that greatly so that we would have well-rounded farmers and no farm family was dependant on one source of income. Of course, gardening was a big thing. We had awards for the best gardens and the most productive. When a family won, it could be assured that it wasn't going to starve and that it would have a balanced diet, which also always improved the attitudes and the health and their enthusiasm for a better balanced diet. Too, they were always going to have some kind of income, because if cotton was down they would have the soybeans or a little patch of garden and maybe a stand of timber.

MR. AHLGREN: At any rate, it was a well-rounded production. Well, as I told (cont'd.)

you, for several years we had as many as 100,000 farm families entered.

But this is a case of a project becoming too successful. Then in the last few years we've found, (before 1965 when we discontinued it) that we only had about 3,700 farm families entered in this whole area. They were all going along at top speed, and there wasn't any real need for the program. We also had been pushing industrial development on a small scale. That is, we envisioned the perfect rural, or small-town, community operation. That would be to have small industries with farms on the periphery of the community. Where the farmer, or his family, could work in the industry and still have his own little farm, enough for his garden, and maybe get a little cash crop. When there is a shut-down or slow-down or a lapse near business between seasons, so that he would have something to do. We now have a very vigorous program on that.

DR. CRAWFORD: Approximately when did you start the Plant to Prosper program?

MR. AHLGREN: 1934 was the first effort toward a farmer who showed awareness of how to follow the advice of the consultations with the county agricultural agent or the home demonstration agent. Well, that was purely just to pick a good farmer with a committee from three states. These were Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. That went on for a couple of years with an increasing enrollment of people who wanted their farms to be looked at. But about 1939--'38 or '39--after a period of meetings we put out a book--a record book--which set forth specifically how many acres in cotton, how many in soybeans, how many cattle, how many so on. We had judges in each county and then in each state. They estimated what the progress had been

MR. AHLGREN: in the farm and the family. We had points for home improvement.
(cont'd.)

If they had added a new wing or put in inside plumbing. . . it was all relative. A man with considerable capital or resources was not given any advantage over a man with nothing. The man with nothing made a little profit, and he was in ratio to the man with more resources and lots of profit. It caught on, and in 1940 we had delegations from Australia and Spain to come over here to study what we were doing. At one time we had similar programs in twenty-seven other states. Michigan, for instance, struck me as kind of funny. They have a big celery industry there in central Michigan. They were dependant on the celery. So they came down to learn our diversified set-up and applied it to Michigan.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was this the first such program that you know of?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes, as well as I know, because it grew out of continuing things. We would add to the needs, and we had the blessings of the Department of Agriculture, of course. We never did have the President as a speaker, but we had two vice-presidents, and senators and we had the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture several times, and the Head of the Federal Reserve Board at our annual Plant to Prosper rallies. It was area participation, and the individual communities, in many cases, would have their own Plant to Propser contests in which the winners could enter the state contest.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you organize that, sir? I mean for the counties.

MR. AHLGREN: Through the county agent and the home demonstration agent. Then, as you know, these agriculture programs came on and each county had a committee to decide what crops they were going to raise and so on, or what

MR. AHLGREN: their quota would be. We leaned havily on them. They were (cont'd.)

a knowledgable people of the community. Then about '39. . . It had been pretty much a white project, but in '39 we organized what we called the Negro project, Live at Home. The white was Plant to Prosper, and the Negro was Live at Home. Of course, in later years, we merged the two programs. I remember that back in the '39 or '40's it wouldn't have been good to have tried and merge them then, because the closer you get to the farm and the soil the more pronounced the conflict became between white and black.

DR. CRAWFORD: About when did you merge, then, sir?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, shortly after the war.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were they both under the name Plant to Prosper?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, we merged them into Plant to Prosper.

DR. CRAWFORD: What area did you include in this?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, that is another thing. We started out with a three-state area, and then we later enlarged it to include Missouri. In fact, we had several winners from Missouri in the sweepstakes prize. The cash prize wasn't much, maybe \$500. But, of course, back in 1934, \$500 was pretty good. Our newspaper people would look over these records and see where some young farm couple whohad been at it only two or three years were clearing \$10,000 a year. That opened a lot of eyes. Now, we had a land owners' division for a while. That's the big operator. He was judged on how he permitted his tenants or his renters. . . what latitude he gave them and what assistance he gave them. Not in handing them something, but in permitting them to work out something for themselves.

MR. AHLGREN: That lasted only a little while. Incidentally, we met some (cont'd.)

resistance in certain areas. I was petitioned by a committee from Mississippi not to come down there and stir up things amongst their tenants. They didn't persuade us at all. We went right ahead. Later in that same area the county agent came up to present me with an award. They finally saw that we were not trouble-makers. We were not trying to do anything but to bring stability into their economy. We took a lot of peaks and valleys out of the economy and made things there stable. The bankers were intensely interested, because that's where the farmer went to get his money and where his mortgages were, and, of course, the merchants were co-operative. We had good cooperation. The Arkansas Power and Light Company, for instance, gave prizes. They also had a competition of their own modeled after Plant to Prosper. Their winners were eligible to enter ours, not as winners, but as competitors. We didn't care. The more the merrier, as long as we controlled our own program. Now, we insisted that nobody, not even our own circulation department, knew who entered or their addresses. Only our Plant to Prosper bureau and the individual county agents knew, because we didn't want any advertising schemes or subsidising efforts in on anybody's part. We wouldn't even let our circulation department know, because you know those scoundrels, they would probably be right in there trying to get a subscription if we had a winner. We had a lot of winners, of course. We had county winners, and then we had state winners, and then we had the sweepstakes winners.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you make the selection? How did you set up the staff or committees to do that?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, in each state you had a number of agricultural operations. You would probably choose the Farmers' Home Administration head, or maybe the banker. Maybe if for the state competition, perhaps the state Commissioner of Agriculture would be one of the judges. This is more the state than the county break down. Of course, you have your county agent, your home demonstration agent, and maybe a merchant or a banker. They go out and visit these farms and look at the records. Then there was our Plant to Prosper director. It was a full-time operation with him. I mean, he was travelling all of the time. In the fall, before awards time, we had maybe three persons travelling all the time.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was your bureau chief a member of the newspaper staff?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, sure.

DR. CRAWFORD: How much time did he devote to this?

MR. AHLGREN: Full time, full time. And in the fall a lot of overtime.

The photographers went along, and on many of these trips they would take pictures of what they had done in certain areas, which inspired the others to come on and join and enter.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was this financed entirely by the newspaper?

MR. AHLGREN: Entirely, except for those prizes that later the Chamber of Commerce or a bank or a merchant would contribute.

DR. CRAWFORD: This obviously covered a large area. When did you start noticing the changes? For example, changes from one crop to diversified farming?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, it started almost immediately, because that was the way you entered. After the first two years, after '37, we all started getting a more scientific approach to this. We had a better balanced approach, but not just choosing a farmer because he's been outstanding. That's more like the Future Farmers of America's master farmer. Ours was a planned business method of farming.

DR. CRAWFORD: When did you start noticing. . .

MR. AHLGREN: It was almost. . .well, '38 or '40, and then the war came on. It was most apparant at our annual banquet for them. We used to have a rally at the auditorium and have the outstanding speaker--the Secretary of Agriculture or Chester Davis, who was then the Food Administrator. . . someone of similar stature. We had vice president Wallace here and one other vice president. Well, anyway, we had a number of Secretaries of Agriculture. Then we would go into the Claridge for lunch. This was just for the winners. We couldn't handle everybody that came in. That night we would have a banquet at the Peabody, which would fill the main ballroom and the Louis XVI room--about six-hundred-and-fifty people. We noticed when we started out that some of these farm families would show up there with their babes in arms and the mother even nursing them, the father in overalls and she in her Mother Hubbard. As they prospered we watched change in dress. Of course, we watched our record books, too, and the amazing income leap. Then the war came on and this became increasingly important as more food and fibre had to be produced. They started prospering pretty good around 1941 or '42.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was a good period for American agriculture.

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, it certainly was.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did your judging become more difficult as you had more general prosperity in the '40's?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, and we had more crops that were introduced, too, cover crops and the legumes were introduced. The legumes would be more effective in one area, and you would have to weigh the virtues of each in their own perspectives and locale. Well, there were the different cattle strains to come in, too. It got to be kind of complicated. You had to depend on these farm experts. Oh, we always did, for that matter. Maybe I am over-simplifying, but really, it started out as kind of a bulletin board for the agriculture agents and the home demonstration agents. We gave them credence. We kind of glamourized their activity and pointed out and showed pictures where they had brought about things in farming and so on. Out of that evolved this more, well, not scientific, but an inexact science. Still, it was utilizing the land to its best potential.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you know of any other cases where the newspapers have done as much to develop the economy in the surrounding regions?

MR. AHLGREN: No, I'm aware of the Charlotte Observer, which had some farm-encouraging program before we did. I think that maybe they just offered prizes. The Kansas City Star has always been interested in agriculture, and I think that they have backed the Future Farmers of America and the American Farmers, but I don't think that they actually were the motivating force and the one that provided the manpower and so on. Then, as I told you, this was copied in twenty-seven states by one newspaper or another. Not only the newspapers, but sometimes it was the Chamber of Commerce that

MR. AHLGREN: would project it.
(cont'd.)

DR. CRAWFORD: Whose idea was this, and what people were most prominent in developing it?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, it was an outgrowth of a number. I would say that perhaps when James Hammond was published of the Commercial Appeal, he was looking for something dramatic to identify the Commercial Appeal with. We were in the depression in those days--1934--and during the depression we had to fight all of the N. R. A.'s and everything else. At that time I believe that I was city editor. He was the first one to assign Harry Martin to go into the farming area and meet with the various county agents and see who had the star farmers of this area. It was not my idea originally, but I think that it was Parkson Teague, an editorial writer, who said, "Why don't you do something about encouraging farming? You might even give some kind of an award and publicize what the good farmers are doing. This is an agricultural region and if it prospers, then Memphis prospers." Oh, let me see, the executive editor turned to me. I was city editor, and he said, "Can you assign somebody to go out and see what we can do to encourage these people, and maybe we'll offer some prizes." Then the Chamber of Commerce caught on to it, and they said, "We'll supplement your award with a Chamber of Commerce award," which they did for many years. Well, they did right up to the last. When I came back here in '36, Gene Rutland and I worked on a program to make it more stable. . . to insert four factors in it--four standards. You couldn't just go out and say, "Oh, that's a good-looking farm, that's a good-looking home," and give them an award. We sat down to work out a formula. It took us

MR. AHLGREN: until about 1938, when we first started our books. By that time (cont'd.)

Walter "Bull" Durham, was the director. We sat down with the four. . .

(by that time we had brought in Missouri) agricultural commissioners and with the F. H. A., (the Farmers' Home Administration) and the federal agencies. We worked out a program of standards. They were pretty general, but there was a provision that if it was a cotton-growing area you didn't want to take rich cotton land and turn it into growing peanuts or something; so you had to make certain standards for certain circumstances. Then we included home-making, additions to the farm, participation in the community activities, civic leadership. Well, that came later, but it evolved.

I don't think that you can give any one person, unless it would be Parkson Teague who suggested that we do something about the farm area.

Well, you see, I left here in early '34, when the thing was set up or announced, but nobody really knew what was going on. In '36, when I got back here, I found that it was pretty much like it had started. They would just go out and find and invite some farm families in and show them. They were designated by their county agricultural agent, and they had a banquet at the Peabody. Then out of that grew a kind of a forum and widely-known speakers came, and it was carried on networks all through the South here for years on hook-ups from Florida to Texas. They put it on during the Farm and Home Hour.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, this was a public service project of a very large magnitude, which does seem unusual for a newspaper to sponsor. Why did the Commercial Appeal give this such support?

MR. AHLGREN: Because we originated it, and we gave it such support because we wanted to take the peaks and valleys out of the economy around here. Farm people were dependant almost exclusively on cotton, except those who had lumber stands. But even then reforestation wasn't a science of general application here. It was just a matter of trying to stop this feast and famine stuff and to have a steady income for these people. As they prospered, Memphis prospered; hence the very (I guess you would call it "corny") title, Plant to Prosper.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, it seems to me very unusual in that you did so much in such a concrete way to correct this. I have had the belief that the role of a newspaper was more to write editorials, I suppose, and take less action. Do you consider this a rather unique thing?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, no. Most newspapers have some promotion campaign, but this was most unusual in that it attracted wide-spread attention. Readers' Digest had two articles about it; one at the early stage and one at the later. It was considered for a Pulitzer Prize, but there wasn't enough heavy drama to it to really put it over. It was on the news reels, and we had quite a big exposure. I made a talk at the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce up there at an agricultural committee called The Farmers' Club. Senator Bricker was the other speaker. We had quite a turnout. I was very much impressed. This was Cleveland, Ohio. Anyway, Bricker was mayor of Cleveland, and then he was governor and then United States Senator.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was it Bricker?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes, it was Bricker. Yes, John Bricker. Well, he was governor at the time, and he introduced me. There were quite a few people interested in what we did. They came from Australia, Spain, commissions from their governments.

DR. CRAWFORD: I begin to see why you consider this one of the two important things that you've done, I suppose. Why did you close the program?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, because we got down to twenty-seven to thirty-seven hundred farm families from a peak of 100,000 families, and you spread that over four states. By 1965, they had achieved awareness of what they should do, and they just weren't interested in entering the contest in sufficient numbers. There wasn't any way, really, that they could go unless they did something dramatic. More Negro tenants could have entered, but they were displaced by machinery or by their own movements as the young Negroes moved north and west and east and left the incompetent ones behind. They didn't want to farm or couldn't farm, and you try to work with them and they didn't know what it was all about. Plus the fact that mechanized farming had come in and there wasn't any place for any farm enterprises.

DR. CRAWFORD: I believe that the purpose of this program was carried out as you travelled through all of the states that were a part of this--Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi and Missouri. You see a great deal of diversified farming now. You see soybeans, stock raising, timber, and so forth. I think that except in mainly a few large operations there is very little reliance on one crop. Perhaps the program had accomplished a purpose by this.

MR. AHLGREN: It had. That was the judgement of the agriculture people.

They said, "We'll still cooperate with you, but now it's not worth the effort that you have to make each year."

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel that the declining percentage of rural population made it less important?

MR. AHLGREN: Of course. It was not so much the tenants. The area had improved communication, improved transportation; and, as I say, these industrial complexes would compliment farming. That was our next move. So we just went into that. Now, in our industrial awards, we weighed heavily those industries that are so situated to encourage continuous farm operation, so in that sense it still continued but under another name.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was it well-supported by merchants in the area?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes! Especially in the area here. It didn't cost them anything here, of course. Well, it didn't cost them anything in those small communities, except what they wanted to put up and consented to. It was the virtue of it. The bankers were the biggest force of enthusiasm because they had so many mortgaged farms, and unless these people improved them and paid off their mortgages, why. . . everything was better.

DR. CRAWFORD: It seems to me that this Plant to Prosper project may have had in effect, been comparable in some way to that of the Tennessee Valley Authority on the economic development of the region.

MR. AHLGREN: I think that that is a very good comparison, although, we didn't in effect, have access to flood control measures. TVA always worked closely with us, especially in the matter of recommending fertilizer

MR. AHLGREN: and things like that. You see, they are in the fertilizer (cont'd.) business. Oh, yes, and TVA as a cultural director frequently supplied one of the judges, even though its main area was not here. But they did have a great interest in West Tennessee and some of North Mississippi. But at no time was the government the over-riding factor. We didn't depend on the government to handle it. Some of these farm agents that were being paid by the government were preaching our doctrine that self-help is the best help.

DR. CRAWFORD: You were able to work through them, weren't you?

MR. AHLGREN: Oh, yes, without them we would have been nothing. Sure, we had to.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did your sweepstakes committee make its choice?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, they would probably take three chairmen or the four chairmen of the committees and they would just meet and say that this is the one that I have and this is the one that I have and just make up their minds as to the winner. Of course, this is where our bureau director came in, and he was the chairman just to prevent any domination of any state.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel that this needed to be replaced by something to encourage industrial development?

MR. AHLGREN: Sure, and this was my idea under the small industries program, because I could see that the shift in farm population, the improved communications, resulted in the displacement of farm families. Most of our farm areas were very well-taken care of, but the small industries that we needed for our economy were not always full-time operations.

MR. AHLGREN: They had their peaks and valleys and their seasons and off-
(cont'd.) seasons. So we encouraged them in this periphery farming idea so that a man or woman could work in the factory and they could have, also, a little farming operation, if it's no more than just a garden that would supply them with pretty much their food the year 'round.

DR. CRAWFORD: Why do you think so much change has occurred in the area (I know that it's national, as well, though) in the change from rural to urban living?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, this goes back to facts that I mentioned--communication, transportation, and mechanized farming--improved farming methods. It's going on all the time. You have improved planning, improved weed eradication and irrigation, and improved harvesting and every possible field. The country used to require one farmer for every eight or nine persons. Now it's one farmer for every sixteen or fifteen persons.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think that this ratio will continue to change?

MR. AHLGREN: I think so, yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you see anything being done to encourage industry in the same way that your program has encouraged agriculture?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, this program that I just outlined to you.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think that it is working as effectively as the agricultural program?

MR. AHLGREN: No, in the first place it didn't have the demand of the despaired ones. Now, these small industries that are coming in here are coming in for distribution and climate, but especially for the help that they can find here, the labor forces. Some of them are escaping from the hard



MR. AHLGREN: unionization that exists in the North and Northeast. But not (cont'd.)

as many as in New York in the old days. These union people and all of the exemptions that they had. . . talking about the union organizers and the exemptions that they had and the protection that they had has moved along. So there you are.

DR. CRAWFORD: That's part of this change from countryside to city?

MR. AHLGREN: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, this is one of the more remarkable program of development, comparable, I think, in some ways with TVA. I don't know of anything else, really, that compares with it. Of course, we had government operations of all sorts to help agriculture in the '30's and continuing. But I know of nothing privately developed or sponsored to compare with this.

MR. AHLGREN: Of course, TVA played a big part, directly and indirectly, because it came into West Tennessee, which is principally our area. Then it came into North Mississippi. Then here is Arkansas right across the river, and the Arkansas Power and Light had to stire its stumps and so did the Mississippi Power and Light. So that, in effect, you got a great many more electrical outlets than you would if TVA hadn't been in the area. It was the same with the telephone company. Then R. E. A. came in, and that was a threat, too, to the power companies. Instead of saying, "Wait until you get enough customers before we put in the electrical equipment," they went on and strung it tokeep the co-ops from getting in there. I am not a great enthusiast of co-ops as they are constituted now. I'm in favor of groups of farmers getting together

MR. AHLGREN: so that they could buy seed at a discount and helping each other (cont'd.)

that way. But when the co-ops got into business and started owning oil stations and tax-free barge operations and things like that, that is carrying it too far. But that's an aside. Nevertheless, the co-ops did have their affect on stimulating this thing.

DR. CRAWFORD: What changes have you noticed in the newspaper's area in the form of erosion control and so forth? Has this program been in effect?

MR. AHLGREN: Well, that was another thing, this soil erosion program of the government's. They would come in and help tremendously. The people availed themselves of it that needed it. I give them credit for whatever progress they made, if they were doing it themselves.

DR. CRAWFORD: This was a factor, then, in the Plant to Prosper program?

MR. AHLGREN: In some areas, yes. It was a great deal of it. They would plant kudzu grass and things like that--kudzu vines--to protect the land, and the earth and bring it back into production years later.

DR. CRAWFORD: You've noticed a tremendous change, I suppose, in North Mississippi since you've been here?

MR. AHLGREN: I was married in 1932, and we drove to New Orleans where we took a boat to Havana for our honeymoon. We drove back, and the land erosion haunted me. I had been in North Mississippi before while driving down to places. They had gravel roads. It was always an adventure to go anywhere in North Mississippi because of their roads. It was the same in Arkansas, but they didn't have the erosion as much as you have in Mississippi. To look at it now and think back in those days, why, it's just another world. Those great gashes of red clay along the roadsides were just depressing.



MR. AHLGREN: Now with the soil conservation projects they have built them
(cont'd.)
back.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, it seems to me that this program did a good deal in
saving the natural resources, the soil and so forth.

MR. AHLGREN: Sure.

DR. CRAWFORD: Even the sources as well, eliminating or reducing the poverty--
rural poverty.

MR. AHLGREN: Well, and giving them well-balanced diets, putting them in
communication with other areas and that sort of thing, fostering civic
projects.

DR. CRAWFORD: I see why you consider this one of the major reforms, or one
of the major projects of the times.



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